

Fixing California's High School Exit Exam

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Almost 100,000 high school seniors—about one in eight—have not yet passed the California High School Exit Exam or CHSEE. Half of all English learners and two-thirds of special education students have yet to pass the test. If these students fail to do so by the summer of 2006 they will be denied their high school diploma. The economic costs to the state alone will be staggering—\$27 billion in lost wages and \$1.2 billion in lost state taxes.

A number of lawsuits have already been filed challenging the legitimacy and fairness of the exam in a state where 20,00 teachers are not fully credentialed and many students do not have adequate textbooks. But there are more fundamental problems with CHSEE that could be addressed by changing the exam and how it is used to award a high school diploma.

Proponents of the exam argue that a high school diploma based simply on passing a number of prescribed courses in different subject areas does not provide a clear signal to prospective employers. A state-wide exam based on a set of prescribed subject matter standards—currently covering the subjects of math and English—will ensure that all public high school students in California have cleared a common and rigorous hurdle.

One fundamental problem is that the exam will create an “all-or-nothing” diploma with little market value. For college-bound students this is not a problem—colleges use a variety of information to judge applicants, including coursework, grades, and scores on a national tests. But for students seeking jobs, employers will have to differentiate among a bewildering array of diplomas with different requirements: diplomas issued by California public schools before and after the CSHEE, diplomas issued by California private schools where exams are not required,

and diplomas issued by public and private high schools throughout the United States with a variety of different course and test requirements.

A second fundamental problem with the current all-or-nothing diploma is that it ignores what economists call “noncognitive” skills—attitudes and social skills such as motivation, tenacity, trustworthiness, and perseverance that are difficult to measure, but highly valued by employers. Research studies have found that 70-80 percent of the market value of a high school diploma can be attributed to these social skills. A high school diploma that recognizes cognitive skills but ignores social skills further limits its market value. As Nobel economist James Heckman notes, research “demonstrates the folly of a psychometrically oriented educational policy that assumes cognitive skills to be all that matter.”

The solution to the current all-or-nothing diploma is to create a differentiated diploma that recognizes both the cognitive and noncognitive skills that students acquire in high school. Social skills would be recognized by the traditional high school diploma based on students passing a number of prescribed courses. Cognitive skills would be recognized by proficiency scores on national tests or equivalent indicators rather than by passing or failing a single state exam.

Using national exams or equivalent indicators would have a number of benefits. First, it would further increase the market value of California’s high school diploma. The content of state-exams varies from state to state, which limits their usefulness to employers. National exams, such as Advanced Placement (AP) tests and the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), are based on the same set of national standards. So employers could easily judge the cognitive skills of students from different years, from different states, and from private as well as public schools, just like universities do now. Second, these exams cover a number of different subjects,

providing information on a wider array of cognitive skills than most current state exams. Third, equivalent indicators, such as portfolios of student work, would allow students who have difficulty with traditional tests (non-English-speaking and disabled students) to demonstrate their cognitive skills in other ways.

The idea of a differentiated diploma is not new. Many states have awarded differentiated diplomas in the past. In fact, California actually has such a system in place—the Golden State Diploma—that recognizes high school coursework and proficiency scores on a number of subject matter tests. But that diploma has never been advertised or widely used, so it has little market value. Recreating a differentiated high school diploma will address two fundamental problems with CSHEE by providing a clear signal to employers and a fair hurdle to students.

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